

From The Pastor

‘The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark’.

This introduction to today’s reading alerts us that something deep and essential is going to be heard. The word ‘passion’ here is used in such a way that we associate its meaning with the suffering and death of Jesus. This is not an incorrect assumption, but it may be incomplete.

Dying on the Cross out of love for the world is an act of passion. Perhaps we associate the passion of Jesus with the tortuous suffering he endured during the ordeal of his trial, road to Calvary, and his crucifixion and death. This singular act of love is indeed a passionate, wholehearted act of complete self-giving. Yet, if we look at the whole truth of the Lord Jesus and the way he lived his life, we see that his passion is much more inclusive than his time on the Cross.

Passion is most often defined by the feeling and expression of the deepest emotions: anger, love, hate, and perhaps solidarity. In the case of Jesus, passion describes the essential rhythm of his life. Jesus, once commissioned for public ministry at the time of his baptism, holds a singular focus to accomplish the Father’s will. From the time of his baptism, Jesus knows the time has come to put into action the confirmation of his Father’s love. This love not only fills the heart and consciousness of Jesus, but one that flows through Jesus to the entire world.

Empowered with this love, Jesus moves forward to reveal this love for all who will receive it. Knowing this love as the center, and essence of his being, Jesus is passionate to share this love with others. The passion of Jesus is the love of the Father. The love of the Father is so evident and known in the person of Jesus that it flows forth from him. The love of the Father is the love of God for the world, brought into the world in the human\divine person of Jesus. The passion of Jesus is the passion of God to save, reconcile, and unite the world to Himself.

To accomplish this redemption, God needed a body. Therefore, the Incarnation of the divine One is revealed through the Virgin Mary in the person of Jesus. Divinity meets and becomes one with humanity. Love incarnate unencumbered with the burden of sin makes visible all that is possible for the human person free to love as God intended. Jesus is the image of self-giving love; all that it means to die to self for the sake of loving another.

The love of God in Jesus is not just a modeling, a showing off of how we should act if we were freer to love completely. This is real, active, personal love for real people. Mark’s version of the Passion that we read today includes the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with perfumed oil. This story is in each of the gospels giving it strong evidence of authenticity.

This story exemplifies the humanity of Jesus and the passionate love he felt for human beings. It is a special evening and a special dinner. At the same time, it is charged with the anticipation of a critical event. Felt more by Jesus than the others, it appears Mary feels deeply the love of Jesus. Perceiving more than the others the truth of love in Jesus, she selflessly anoints Jesus with expensive perfume. This is a singular act of love not lost on Jesus. Mindful of his own impending death, Jesus swells with love and affection for the kindness shown to him. This, he realizes, is a love to die for. This singular act of reckless generosity shown by a grateful woman, in some tiny way, mirrors the kind of love Jesus will offer to us all on the Cross.

This is another glimpse of the passion of Jesus. His passion is to love and be loved by real human beings. Despite the sin and the woundedness of our lives, God in Christ cannot wait to awaken us to the freedom of redemption through his own suffering and death so that we might more freely love one another. Despite the immediacy of the divine work that lies before him, Jesus feels deeply and appreciates a human act of love on his behalf. His passion is stirred, and he is strengthened for the task that lies ahead.

What part of the Passion most stirs you? How do you personally feel the love of Jesus coming to you from the Cross? It can be easy to get lost in the violence and human cruelty of the account. This cannot be denied. Yet, beyond the sin and evil that is possible for us humans, recall the act of love offered to Jesus by this woman.

The Cross is about the love of God and the passion of God to unite us to Himself. The image of the Cross is one of sin, torture, and evil. It is also an image of beauty and truth that reveals the love of God, and what is possible for human beings open to self-giving love. The love so evident in the life and person of Jesus is now present in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are not Jesus, and we are not called to literally die on a Cross. We are invited to ponder the mystery of this love, and how it is evident in our lives.

Jesus realized and experienced in his anointing that, ‘this is a love to die for’. Do you and I have such acts of love in our lives that similarly inspire us? The passion of love is the passion of the Cross.

Father John Esper